

# WE ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD



## 2023 ADVENT & CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL

Wesley Memorial Methodist Church • 1225 Chestnut Drive • High Point, North Carolina 27262 • 336.812.4800







# ADVENT

This year's theme for our devotional is "We are the light of the world" in congruence with our "We are Wesley" focus for the next year. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus compares his followers to light, saying we "are the light of the world," unable to be hidden.

Light illuminates, and thus dispels darkness. Light permeates a room and provides comfort. Light provides clarity: it separates light from darkness and truth from fiction. Our prayer is that the words of Scripture, and the subsequent words from our fellow Wesley Memorial family, will provide illumination, clarity and comfort to your spiritual life this Advent season.

In addition to the general theme of "light of the world", contributors were asked to write with at least one of the following themes in mind: hope (or promise), preparation (waiting or prophecy), joy (or peace), love (or adoration). Thank you to all who contributed their heartfelt thoughts to this devotional.

## HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

Devotionals are a great place to spark thoughts for journaling, prayer, and worship. Use this devotional on your own or with your family. Each day you will find a reflection, as well as accompanying Scripture. It can be helpful to begin with a prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to speak truth to your heart. Start with the Bible reading, read it slowly, really thinking about what is said. Once you read the day's devotion, allow yourself to reflect on what is read. If a phrase or portion speaks to you, respond to what God is saying in prayer.

Advent is a season of expectant waiting that celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ and that of his eventual return. May the peace of Christ dwell richly in your hearts as we make our way toward a lowly manger in the small town of Bethlehem...





# DECEMBER INVITES

## DECEMBER 1

- 1:00 p.m. - Wesley Memorial School's The Grinch & Cindy Lou Who with Santa & Mrs. Claus (Dining Hall)  
Welcome to Who-Ville! Delight in this Joyful experience as you pretend to be a Who in Who-Ville this Christmas. Be on the lookout for...the...the...THE GRINCH and his dog Max. Cindy Lou Who has plans to help GROW the Grinch's heart by sharing with him the real meaning of Christmas. Visit with Santa and Mrs. Claus while enjoying cocoa and cookies. Sit on their lap sharing what you would like for Christmas and smile for a treasured photo.
- 6:00 p.m. - Lighting of the Christmas Tree (Front Circle)  
Join us as we gather around the Christmas tree with family and friends, singing Christmas carols, and celebrating the joy of the season. Snacks, music, and fun provided!

## DECEMBER 3

Angel Tree Gifts Due!

Angels for the children of incarcerated parents will be available for you to select and will be found in the Narthex, Bridge Cafe, and Adult Sunday School wing.

## DECEMBER 9

- 10 a.m. - Children's Nativity Rehearsal (Sanctuary)  
Children ages 4 through 5th grade can participate in this beautiful depiction of the birth of Christ. Registration is required at [wesleymemorial.org/nativity](http://wesleymemorial.org/nativity)
- 11:30 a.m. - Gingerbread Bash (Dining Hall)  
This is a fun and interactive experience designed for the whole family! We'll build gingerbread nativities, play games, sing songs, hear the Christmas story from the Bible, eat lunch together, and discover that sometimes the best gift comes in the most ordinary box. Registration is required at [wesleymemorial.org/gingerbread](http://wesleymemorial.org/gingerbread)

## DECEMBER 10

- 11 a.m. - Children's Nativity (Sanctuary)

## DECEMBER 13

- 8 a.m. – 7 p.m. - Community Blood Drive (Fellowship Hall)
- 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. - A Very Merry Midweek Motivation Middle School Christmas Party  
Wear your tacky Christmas sweater, bring your friends and great prizes for the top 3 winners

## DECEMBER 14

- 12 p.m. - Senior Adult Christmas Lunch (Dining Hall)

## DECEMBER 15

- 10:30 a.m. - Wesley Memorial School's Kindergarten Nativity Program (Sanctuary)  
It has always been such a very special time to witness the birth of the Baby Jesus reenacted by children. Experience the joy of the season as the greatest story is retold through drama and song. The Inn Keeper points to, "A Stable Warm and Dry", welcoming Joseph and Mary. The star, animals, angels, and shepherds shout out in a joyful noise delighting in the birth of the baby. The kindergarten children will also share fun Christmas secular songs and share a special surprise by playing the handbells. Join us afterwards for Christmas cookies and cider.

## DECEMBER 17

- White Christmas Gifts Due (All Services)  
Please bring a gift wrapped in white that will be given to the shelter at Open Door Ministries.



- 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. - Christmas Drive-Thru

All are invited to drive-thru the Wesley Memorial campus and experience the Nativity story in a unique way. Encounter the Christmas story through audio narration, live actors, Christmas lights and more. Afterward, park and join us at our Christmas Village for free hot cocoa, popcorn, cookies and Christmas carols.

- 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. - Edge of Adventure for 12th Graders

Wear your favorite Christmas apparel & bring a fun gift (\$10 max) for our white elephant gift exchange! Dinner and Dessert provided.

## DECEMBER 18

- 7 p.m. - YAM (Young Adult Ministry - ages 18 to 25) Worship Christmas Party

Our "Christmas Worship Party" for post high school people and their friends! Dinner and Dessert provided in the student ministry wing.

## DECEMBER 24 - Christmas Eve

10:00 a.m. - Blended Sunday Morning Worship Service (Sanctuary)

Morning Service with an inspirational message by Dr. Jeff Patterson and carols. One service only.

4:00 p.m. - Contemporary Service (Fellowship Hall)

Carols and candlelit worship/glow sticks for kids. This service will be livestreamed.

5:00 p.m. - The 50th Annual LOVEFEAST (Sanctuary)

In the candlelit style of the Moravian Lovefeast. Special Music by the chancel choir and soloists accompanied by chamber orchestra and organ. Lovefeast buns and cider will be served during the service.

11:00 p.m. - Traditional Christmas Eve Service (Sanctuary)

A Festival Service with sung carols accompanied by a chamber orchestra and organ. A Christmas message by Dr. Jeff Patterson will be followed by Holy Communion and the lighting of candles. Join us as we carry our light out into the world and sing, under the stars: Joy To The World!

# EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Epiphany is the day Christians remember the coming of the Magi to visit Jesus, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The word "epiphany," from the Greek word epiphania, means appearance or manifestation. The arrival of these visitors was a sign that the incarnation of God in Christ had been made known and was recognized by the heavens to the whole world, so that even Gentile wise men from the East came to pay him homage. This is an observance of great majesty, solemnity and awe.

This year Epiphany Sunday occurs on December 31st and we will have a regular schedule with all three services. Wesley Memorial Kids will be having Poptarts and Pajamas - kids wear your PJs to Sunday School!

You are also invited to Wesley Memorial School's Epiphany: The visit of the King on January 5, 2024. Wesley Memorial School's annual Epiphany Walk is a true celebration as the children, teachers, and volunteers, participate in a glimpse of the journey that the Wisemen took to find the baby, bring Him gifts, and kneel in worship.





# DECEMBER 3

Isaiah 1:1-9

*The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah. (Isaiah 1:1-9)*

*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin, and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14 KJV)*

Ever since twins Esau and Jacob wrestled within their mother, Rebekah's womb, their descendants - the Arab and Jewish nations and cultures - have struggled. Each twin experienced rejection, competition, and reconciliation contaminated with misinterpretation and unforgiveness along with deceitful actions. Their experience and their modeling fit within Biblical prophecy and foretold generations of similar conflicts.

As the current world-wide struggle between descendants of each of the twins flares up into another; inferno of anger, punctuated with unspeakable atrocities on both sides, prayers for the peace of Jerusalem remain unfulfilled.

These seismic struggles and their heart-rending stories reflect the struggle within us all between the love, forgiveness, and humility that comes from God and the unforgiveness, rebelliousness, and pride that befalls us so easily. Let us all look inwardly at our hearts and minds, pray for our awareness of our own rebellion against God, the courage to acknowledge our sins, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to overwhelm our pride and sin with the Love and peace that only He can bring. May this Advent season become a personal advent season in our lives.

*Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, as we see the world in flames of wrath and enmity, your Holy Land especially besieged and bombarded, we ask for your mercy and forgiveness for our individual and collective sins. We pray that you would open the eyes of our hearts conceiving on both sides of contention, for forgiveness and for mutual understanding that might restore the peace of Jerusalem and a pathway for transcending mistrust and anger, and heal our land and your Holy Land. We pray for this advent season to become our own advent of a relationship with the living Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Boge Ravenel





## DECEMBER 4

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

*Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*  
(1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 NIV)

### Building Our Testimony

“God is building a testimony in you.” I found myself saying this expression many years ago to a close friend who was going through a difficult time. This expression has stuck with me, and I have often returned to it as a reminder that our Lord is constantly working in our lives and that we, in turn, are to share our lessons learned as a witness to God’s love, goodness, and grace.

In this passage for today, Paul commends the believers in Thessalonica by writing how their newly-found faith has been a “model” to others. God, in a sense, was “building a testimony” in them so that the gospel “rang out” from them throughout the region to “everywhere.” What must not be overlooked in their model faith is that the Thessalonian believers welcomed the gospel “in the midst of severe suffering.” Although the passage does not identify the exact form of suffering, the next chapter confirms that these believers were suffering persecution from their fellow countrymen because of their new Christian faith (see 1 Thess. 2:14).

That they received the message with such joy in the midst of such suffering testifies to the power of the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of believers. That they turned from pagan idols testifies to the emptiness of worldly attractions and to the fullness—the abundance—of life in Christ. Indeed, now some two thousand years later the testimony of these early Christ followers continues to shape the lives of Christians through the pages of this epistle.

In the Advent Season, we wait expectantly for the coming Messiah who ushered in a new age in which all those who believe and put their trust in Him can share in this testimony-building life where we welcome the Holy Spirit and experience “peace that transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Scripture is replete with how people of faith—from biblical patriarchs like Abraham and Moses to these early Thessalonian converts—followed the Lord despite obstacle, hardship, uncertainty.

*Prayer: Let us pray that we too will stand firm in our faith this Advent Season so that God builds in us a testimony that “models” for others the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of believers. May we also live our lives so that the gospel of Christ “rings out” from us to our neighbors, co-workers, community, and beyond. And may we not hold our testimony just for ourselves but instead proclaim Christ’s work in our lives in order to be a light and comfort, encourage, and inspire others.*

Natt Gantt



## DECEMBER 5

Luke 20:9-19

*He went on to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.*

*"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.'*

*"But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

*"What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."*

*When the people heard this, they said, "God forbid!"*

*Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written:*

*"The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone?*

*Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."*

*The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. (Luke 20:9-19 NIV)*

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of God's Son, let us remember what an awesome, loving God we worship: a God who sent His beloved Son in human form so that He could save us and teach us how God wants us to live. In this parable in Luke 20, Jesus tells the story of the ungrateful tenants. He tells of Israel's history of rejecting the prophets and of God's patience and judgment. He warns the Jewish rulers of the consequences of being rebellious and greedy.

Jesus tells the story of a man who plants a vineyard. The man represents God, and the vineyard is a symbol for Israel, as in Isaiah 5. God gives fertile soil and what is needed to produce fruit. The man rents the vineyard to tenant farmers, (Israelite leaders) and then goes away for a long time. (Having given the Israelites – and us – our charge, God steps aside unless asked for blessing, direction, or encouragement.)

God sends a servant (prophet) to the tenants (Israelite rulers) at harvest time and asks for some of the fruit from His vineyard. The prophet is beaten and sent away empty handed. Jesus shows us our human sin of wanting to be in control and refusing to give God His proper place. God sends another servant (prophet), but he is also beaten and sent away with nothing. A third prophet is wounded and sent out. The owner of the vineyard (God) then sends His beloved Son (Jesus) hoping he will be respected. Jesus is telling us of God's patience and commitment to redemption. The tenants (Israelite rulers) talk it over and throw the owner's Son out of the vineyard and kill him. (Jesus prophesizes His own death.) Jesus says the owner of the vineyard will come and kill the





tenants and give the vineyard to others (the Gentiles).

Jesus then quotes from Psalm 118:22 and asks the people what it means: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?” Jesus says: “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” The rejected stone is Jesus, the cornerstone of the church and our faith. Jesus is letting the Jewish leaders know that his rejection was prophesized long ago.

God has given each of us a vineyard: our own lives to live in obedience to God. God has given us this country where we can worship Him. We are to be fruitful, producing gifts of the Spirit such as repentance, a desire for a right relationship with God, faith, hope, and love. At Christmas let us remember to build our lives centered on faith in Jesus and produce the fruits that God desires. May God bless us as we ask Him to lead us, and may we listen and obey!

*Prayer: Sovereign, Creator, Loving Triune God, help us to make You the cornerstone of our lives. May we listen to Your voice, live according to Your will, and tend the vineyard that You have given us. All that we have is a gift from You. We want to glorify You while caring for what You have entrusted to us. In the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen*

*Barbara Coughlin*





## DECEMBER 6

Isaiah 4:2-6

### ***Lord, Prepare Me to be a Sanctuary***

*On that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgement and by a spirit of burning. Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain. (Isaiah 4: 2-6, NRSV)*

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20, NRSV)*

*But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'. (1 Corinthians 2:9, NRSV)*

Our longing should always be to be as close to our Father in heaven and to be more like Christ.

The season of preparation is one of the toughest in the life of a Christian. During this season, the Lord prepares us for his purpose as we surrender our will to Him. Obvious words that describe this period in our lives are sanctification, trials, and as the prophet Isaiah describes in chapter 4: "... Lord has washed away the filth... purged by blood... by spirit of judgement and by spirit of burning".

All of this sounds frightening and a lot of us hesitate or refrain from giving God total control of our lives. I share with you, as a person who has gone through such a process over and over again, that as daunting as it sounds, the intimacy you get with the holy trinity is something worth experiencing.

Total surrender is difficult, especially for people who are always planning and thinking ahead. During a time in my life when I was pushed over the edge by my failures, I surrendered my life to Christ (I was 17). It was the only thing left to do.

I had a key to the church, and I would go and pray on my own around nighttime. I would kneel at the altar and I wouldn't know what to say. I would praise him and raise his name on high. I expressed my gratitude out loud. I figured it's just me and God, what's there to be embarrassed or shy about? Growing up Methodist, saying things out loud and outward worship wasn't common, so I had to push myself outside of my comfort zone. I remember the night I felt his presence like never before.

I was in the middle of praising, and I felt a warmth wash over me. I raised my hands and I couldn't stop crying. I knelt to the floor as low as I could with my forehead to the floor and I was praising in between tears. They weren't cute little sobs, but full-on cries. In that moment, I knew the Lord was working. Those intimate moments I had spent with him, lead to that special moment where I felt him closer than ever.

I remember this experience the most because it was my first real connection with God. He revealed to me the power of the Holy Spirit and in my heart I knew this was just a tiny taste of what he really could do in my life. During the times where I may rebel or go against his will because of my flesh, I go back to this very moment I





just described. It reminds me of 3 things: I would never trade a moment in his presence for a temporary, earthly desire, I shouldn't let my flesh hinder God's work in me, and I'm nothing without HIM, so what's the point of anything on earth if HE isn't involved?

Brother and sister in Christ, I urge you to do some self-reflection this season and meditate on what is hindering you from fully surrendering your life to God. He wants to use each one of us to expand his kingdom. He wants each one of you to experience the magnitude of His power. Experiencing the Holy Spirit is reaffirmation of what is in heaven and what awaits us on that special day of Jesus' second coming. In this period of waiting, step out of your comfort zone and get intimate with the Lord.

*Prayer: Heavenly Father. I humble myself in your presence. I long to be transformed and be filled with your Holy Spirit. In my human flesh, I cannot reach my full potential or fulfill the purpose you have for me. Knowing this, I ask you to cleanse me, purify my heart and my thoughts, so that I may be used as a vessel to fulfill the great commission. Don't let my fears and doubts hinder me from entering deep into your presence. That the longing to be close to you, Father, grow stronger each day and that I don't run away from your calling. Prepare me to embrace this process of sanctification, so that I may have the courage to surrender every part of my life to you. I want to witness your power in my life. I want to be prepared for your second coming so I may worship with my brethren in heaven. In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Music Suggestion: "Nothing Else" by Cody Carnes

"Lord, prepare me to be a Sanctuary" by Various Artists

*Isabel Valencia*

Administrative Assistant to Pastors, Wesley Memorial Methodist Church





## DECEMBER 7

1 Thessalonians 3:8-9

*It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord. How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence. (1 Thessalonians 3: 8-9 NLT)*

When we were first married, we invested in a basic Fontanini nativity set. We placed it each Christmas in a prominent place that reminded us of the true meaning of this special holiday. Now, fast forward a few years. Our family has grown. We have two children in their preschool years. Just like every other year, we joyously decorated for the holiday season. With young children now, our enthusiasm seemed to translate to even more red, green, gold, and glitter. More packages to entice and the Santa themed decor making its appearance in every room of the house...even the bathrooms!!! And of course, the nativity was ever present. The pieces perfectly positioned in the stable, on a table in our den for all to admire. Baby Jesus was in the center, Mary and Joseph to the left of the manger and the wisemen positioned on the right, with the animals on each side for the perfect balance. Then one day....it happened. I caught my sweet children in the act of playing with the nativity set, moving ALL the pieces "out of place". I watched and listened as they brought the birth of the Christ child to life! In the years that followed, the kids became excited as we added new pieces to our nativity set....Weaver's tent and other town shops, lighted dome well, various townspeople and more animals, just to name a few. Without drawing attention to ourselves, we listened and watched as the imaginative conversations of the nativity scene reflected so much Bible knowledge. Aspects of Noah's Ark, Jonah and the whale, Daniel and the lion, Zacchaeus and many other stories also became part of the pretend conversations! The wonderful preschool and Sunday school teachers at Wesley Memorial truly impacted the spiritual lives of our children as we witnessed through their imaginative play! (On a side note, we also overheard the wise men on their long journey, made a stop for coffee and Krispy Kreme doughnuts.)

Our children taught us a valuable lesson in their early years. It's wonderful that our faith is a focal point in our homes and lives. Our faith should be cherished and always be held in a place of importance. Our Christian beliefs are built on a solid foundation, not delicate, but mighty! Following the example of our young children, we must move the pieces of our Christian faith to actually bring it to life.

*Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we praise you for the love you have shown each of us. We thank you for our families, friends and Wesley Memorial Church for mentoring us in our faith journey. Please open our hearts and minds this Advent season to see the birth of the Christ Child in a different light. May it be through the innocence of a child or theology of an older adult as we bring to life the nativity. Thank you for being a God of hope and light, filling us with joy and peace. We love you, Lord! Amen*

Vanessa and Charles Surles





# DECEMBER 8

Luke 20:41 - 21:4

*A note to the Reader: This devotional is authored by a middle school teacher, so I hope you will be open to and accept it in the form of a "worksheet."*

Directions:

1. Read Luke 20:41-21:4. Write a summary of this scripture below:

2. Read the following prayer. Underline what we should NOT be doing when Jesus returns. Circle what we SHOULD be doing when He returns.

## Make Us Watchful

O Lord our God,  
make us watchful and heedful  
as we await the coming of your Son,  
Christ our Lord,  
that when he comes and knocks,  
he will find us not sleeping in sins  
but awake and rejoicing in his praises;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Source: Gelasian Sacramentary, Source of this version: Modified from Ancient Collects, and Other Prayers, ed. William Bright, 1902, p. 16 #4

The prayer above mentions that Jesus could catch us "sleeping in sins." What does the phrase mean to you? Make sure to especially consider the author's use of the word sleeping.

Reflect back to the scripture for today. Which characters were "sleeping in sins" and what were they doing?

Self-Reflection: On a scale of "sleeping in sin" to "awake and rejoicing in his praises" where are you currently?

Sleeping  
in Sin

Awake and  
Rejoicing in  
His Praises

What can you do to move yourself closer to being caught "awake and rejoicing"?

\*Please feel free to grade this yourself.

Amanda Thompson





## DECEMBER 9

Luke 2:1-7

There is a line in the famous "Twas The Night Before Christmas" poem that resonates with me. "The stockings were all hung by the chimney with care, in the hopes that..."

You know the rest of the line.

It strikes me that all of us have hopes and expectations at this time of year. Mary and Joseph also had expectations as they made their journey to Bethlehem. I imagine they each may have pondered (Mary was especially good at pondering according to the Scriptures) on what was to be. Mary probably made the journey remembering the angel's proclamation at the well and her cousin Elizabeth's blessing. Joseph may have reflected on his dream where a heavenly messenger gave him assurance that Mary was telling the truth about the baby he knew was not his.

Their journey was also made with unanswered questions. The life ahead had not been laid out with guarantees that the path would be easy or without challenge or pain.

Still, they gave themselves to the journey not only to Bethlehem, but toward a future of uncertainty because of hope based on God's promise not yet fully revealed.

That's the way hope works. Not all the answers are present; the path is not fully seen.

What is present is the trustworthy promise and character of the Holy One, who centuries before, proclaimed through the prophets the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem.

The fulfillment of the birth of the Savior wasn't in the way most expected: a manger in a stable and not a noble palace. For some, their expectations were not fulfilled. Mary and Joseph maintained their faith in what the Lord had promised them and through the eyes of hope, the glory of God came to rest in their arms as a little baby boy.

This year as the stockings are hung by the chimney with care in your home, may it in be the hope that the promise of God in the Babe of Bethlehem comes to your heart with peace and rest for your soul.

*Pastor Ken Lyon*

Associate Pastor of Church Vitality & Generosity, Wesley Memorial Methodist Church





## DECEMBER 10

Matthew 2:2

Born a King? The wisemen asked, “Where is He who has been born King?” (Matthew 2:2) We immediately think of a King adorned in elegant robes, rings on his fingers, and a crown on his head. His subjects stand ready to serve the ruler of their Kingdom. His home a castle. Servants at his beck and call. Guards to offer protection. But that isn’t our Jesus!

Jesus’ clothes were not fancy. They were swaddling clothes, common for both rich and poor, but certainly not expensive fabrics of a royal. And he was placed in a manger. How many newborns are placed in a phatnē, which is a feeding trough for cattle, oxen, goats and sheep? That was one of the signs that those seeking the baby Jesus were instructed to look for.

And that stable or cave environment where Jesus was born was certainly not opulent or luxurious and certainly no palace. Nor did Jesus have a bejeweled crown. So what does all this mean to us?

Well, he was what we might call salt of the earth. Just as the manger is where animals go to be nourished, this manger is a place that we should go to be nourished. It is serving up the bread of life to us. In John 6:35, Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” The clothes were swaddling clothes, strips of cloth used to clothe both rich and poor. Jesus was human. He was not unlike you and me. He put on his clothes just like us, one leg at a time. And as for being a King? He was not the kind of king that people were looking for. In those days, a king had power; kings had wealth; kings ruled others. Kings used force and even killed to get their way. With Jesus, none of these earthly king perceptions were true of Him. Well, He did have power, but not the kind the people were hoping He possessed and would use against their enemies.

The shepherds were the first to visit the stable, not the wisemen. They were the everyday, common folk of the community. They had no clout and no influence. But they were impressionable and likely very humbled to be the recipients of the news concerning Jesus’ birth. The religious leaders of that day were often more concerned about themselves than the birth of God’s Son. We find out later in the scripture just how these “religious leaders” would treat Jesus. So they weren’t the ones to first tell. The shepherds shared the news with others and those that heard the story likely knew they were receiving the message from trustworthy, humble individuals.

Also consider his earthly father was a carpenter. In those days, a carpenter not only worked with wood but also stone as most structures contained both elements. They were resourceful and they were creative in what they made, built, and shaped. Well Isaiah 64:8 says “But now, LORD, you are our father. We are the clay, and you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand.” A message was sent to everyone that if we let Jesus shape us and mold us, He will use us to the Glory of his Kingdom! Like His Father who used his hands to build material things, Jesus too used His hands for crafting, shaping, and molding. Only He did it with people!

*Prayer: Lord, We often judge people by what they wear, how much clout or influence they possess, who is in their social circles, where they live, what kind of work position they hold or title they claim, and how much money is in their pocket. But Jesus proved those criteria superficial. Forgive us, for what matters is the character of the person. Jesus Christ was indeed the King of ALL people, the Savior of ALL people, and a living example for ALL people. And I thank God that Jesus is all of that for me, not just at Christmas time, but everyday of the year! Amen!*

Mark F. Pierce



# DECEMBER 11

Matthew 2

## *Seekers of the Light*

The scripture text noted is the only biblical reference we have to one of the highlight events surrounding the birth of Jesus. It's the familiar story of the visit of the wise men from the east who had traveled a long distance seeking the child who "was to be born king of the Jews."

Often, we present this event a little short of the facts; so here are the facts of this event as presented in Matthew chapter 2:

- The three wise men are often portrayed as royalty, kings, or princes from the far east. It is more probable that these men were astronomers/astrologers, maybe even members of an emperor's court from a country a great distance from Bethlehem.
- The star that appeared on the night of the birth of the Christ Child was seen by these students of the stars. How they knew the star that rose that night was the star created for the king of the Jews is unknown. It may have been an angel in a dream that brought them word of the star's purpose, as later they were indeed instructed in a dream not to return to King Herod who wanted them to disclose to him the location of the Christ child.
- Because of the distance these men had to travel, they did not reach the place where Jesus and his "parents" were residing until Jesus was possibly as old as two years of age.

What I admire most about these three men is not just their decision of making the long trip and their courageous refusal to yield to King Herod's devious and harmful desire to know the location of the Christ child, but their persistence in following the star, night after night after night on this lengthy trip.

And their reward when they arrived at the star's beam of light focused over the home of the child who would be the King of the Jews was to worship Him and present their gifts to Jesus. It was the same star that had dispelled the darkness of each night since its creation, and most likely burned out shortly thereafter.

## **We Are Wesley, Followers of the Light.**

As the light that led the three Wise Men was able to dispel the darkness of the night, so we who have placed our faith and trust in Jesus the Christ must continue to follow the light of Christ in our own lives, day by day. Jesus told his disciples (Matt. 5:14) that they (we) are the light of the world, allowing His light to shine in and through us to dispel the darkness of sin in the culture of the world around us. We do that best by living by the light of the written Word, day by day through the power of the Holy Spirit, and by following Christ as Lord, who is the true light of the world (John 8:12). In being and doing that, we will live as St. Paul wrote: "Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord," (Eph.5: 8-10).

*Prayer: As the Wise Men were persistent in their obedience and desire to find the Messiah, Jesus, we rededicate to you our lives this Advent Season to continue by the Holy Spirit's power to walk daily as children of the Light. Amen.*

*Steve Young*



# DECEMBER 12

Isaiah 6:1-13

Not only does Isaiah 6 describe the calling of the prophet Isaiah, it has also become our Order of Worship: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Today's devotion focuses on both of these subjects.

## ADORATION

In verse 3, the seraphs are calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." The word "holy" appears three times in succession only twice in the Bible and both times this exclamation comes from the angels. This unique expression points to the perfection of God and the angels will exclaim this sequence for eternity.

## CONFESSION

In verse 5, Isaiah confesses to God, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

## THANKSGIVING

In verses 6-8, one of the seraphs flew to Isaiah holding a live coal which had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs and touched Isaiah's mouth with the hot coal. Afterwards, Isaiah heard the Lord's voice, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" With thanksgiving, Isaiah answered this call, "Here am I; send me!"

## SUPPLICATION

Supplication is the act of earnestly and humbly asking for something. To God's call, Isaiah humbly responds, "How long, O Lord?"

In worship when we pray, sing, or recite creeds and scripture, we are talking to God. To believe in Him, to have faith in His goodness, and to know His constant presence, will help us to live as beacons to others. During this Advent season, open your heart to God and feel His love and His peace. As we focus on "We Are Wesley" for this coming year, listen for God calling you. God reveals himself to the obedient and He will lead you when you answer, "Here I am, Lord. I will go, Lord."

*Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, We are grateful for all you have given us. We especially thank you for sending your son, Jesus Christ, to teach us the way to you. We confess that we haven't obeyed your laws and ask for your mercy. Help us to be better faithful followers and not afraid to answer your call. We love you, God. Amen*

*Laney Morris*





## DECEMBER 13

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

*Paul, Silas and Timothy,*

*To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

*Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*

*All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

*With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12)*

Paul opens the second letter to the Thessalonians with a message of grace and peace for their church. He thanks God for them as their faith is growing, their love for each other is increasing, and their church is enduring. In this Paul displays his wisdom as a leader.

The Thessalonians had sent a message to Paul full of self-doubt.

They had been afraid that their faith would not stand the test. With wisdom Paul highlighted their virtues and achievements as an encouragement. Well judged praise can often do what criticism cannot do, and wise praise fills us with the desire to do better. Here are the three points Paul chose as being the marks of a church that is alive.....a faith which is strong, a love which is increasing, and a constancy which endures and overcomes.

Paul's message is that the glory of Christ is in those who through Him have learned to endure and to conquer, and so to shine like lights in a dark place. As we wait for Christmas let us take this lesson from Paul, and thoughtfully use uplifting words of encouragement with those around us.

Paul's Prayer: *We pray that our God may count you worthy of His calling, and that by His power He may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him." Amen*

*Ann Byerly*



# DECEMBER 14

Luke 22:1-13

## *The Preparation*

Dear friends in Christ,

As we continue this journey into the Advent season, the theme “We are the Light of the World” reminds us of our role in God’s divine plan. As the days have grown darker, we are to continue letting our Lord’s light shine through. Advent is a time of preparation, a season of expectant waiting, just as we read in Luke 22:1-13 KJV. In this passage, we see Jesus instructing his disciples to prepare for the Passover, emphasizing the importance of readiness and prophecy.

In those days, the disciples asked Jesus where they should prepare for the Passover meal. They were met with specific instructions, highlighting the meticulous planning and the sense of prophecy in this significant event. Jesus, the Light of the World, knew that His time had come. He wanted His disciples to be prepared for what was to come, not only in that moment but for the greater fulfillment of God’s plan for salvation.

As we reflect on this passage, it serves as a powerful reminder that our lives are intertwined with divine purpose. We, too, are called to prepare, wait, and anticipate the fulfillment of God’s promises. In the context of this Advent season, we prepare our hearts and lives to celebrate the birth of Christ, but we also eagerly await His second coming.

Just as the disciples diligently followed Jesus’ instructions, we, as followers of Christ, are called to prepare our hearts for His indwelling presence. We must be ready to shine His light in a world that often dwells in darkness. This season of Advent is an opportunity to rekindle our faith, to read and meditate on His Word, and to pray, like the disciples, for a deeper understanding of God’s plan in our lives.

Let us pray:

*Heavenly Father, as we enter this season of Advent, help us to prepare our hearts for the arrival of Your Son, our Savior. May we be like the disciples in Luke 22, diligently following Your instructions and eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of Your promises. Empower us to be the light of the world, sharing Your love, grace, and truth with others. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

Chase Tobin





# DECEMBER 15

Isaiah 7:10-25

Unbelief is one of the greatest offenses against God. King Ahaz, the king of Judah, rejected God's offer of a sign, because He did not trust in God and instead, trusted in man. At this point in Israel's story, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the king of Samaria, allied together to wage war against Judah. God then promised King Ahaz, "[Your defeat] shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass" (Isaiah 7:7). The Lord ensured King Ahaz his victory on the condition of his trust in Him. Despite God's promise, King Ahaz took silver and gold from the temple of God and gave them to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, to win protection and favor against his enemies (2 Kings 16: 7-9).

Ahaz deserved to be killed for his contempt for Isaiah, the prophecy, and God. God knew King Ahaz would erect idols in the temple of God, worship them, and offer up his children as sacrifice to Molech, an idol god (2 Chron 28: 2-3). Yet, because of His covenant with the house of David, God outstretched His arm with the intention of saving Ahaz and Judah. Then, against all odds, the Lord offers the promise of Emmanuel as a sign of future deliverance for Israel: "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isa 7:14).

Emmanuel. God with us. In Isaiah 6, one chapter before, Isaiah witnesses the glory of our God. God is seated on the highest throne. He dwells in inapproachable light, whom no one can see. The hem of His robe fills the court of the temple. The highest order of angels minister to the Lord, ceaselessly crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." He is indescribably great; no depth or height can contain Him; He has created, filled, and sustained all things. This God desires to step out of heaven, and into earth to be with us. Emmanuel chose to reveal Himself in the womb of a virgin, inside a manger, and among animals. Truly, the Lord was eager to bridge the gap between Himself and mankind through Jesus Christ! Emmanuel's greatest desire is to be with us. The Lord's great sign of love to humanity was the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. God invites us to see Him in all of His glory and in His humility. Although God is all-powerful, He chose to reveal Himself as a man. He chose to identify with our weaknesses as humans. As we approach Christmas, we remember that Christ has drawn near to us in the face of our sin, rebellion, and disbelief. Let us seek and find Him this Christmas season, as He is eager to reveal to us the sign of Emmanuel!

## Questions:

Have we, like King Ahaz, forsaken God's promise in exchange for trusting in ourselves or people? Are there any areas of unbelief in God in my life?

Have we believed that Jesus does not love us or care about us? Have we misunderstood His true desire to be with us as God Emmanuel?

*Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your only son, Emmanuel. We thank you for your presence Holy Spirit. We pray that you will forgive us for our unbelief. Forgive us for not believing in your promise for our lives. We choose to trust in your word. Thank you for coming to dwell among us. We love you, and in Jesus's name we pray, amen.*

*Elli Yu*

Pastoral Intern, Wesley Memorial Methodist Church





# DECEMBER 16

Matthew 18:3-4

## ***God So Loved The World***

This is the most exciting time of year. This is the time when we, as Christians, celebrate the Advent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My two granddaughters enjoy helping me decorate the Christmas tree. As we go through boxes of ornaments, they get so excited to find old handmade ornaments they had made in past years and ornaments collected from vacation spots that bring back memories.

Afterwards we bake cookies and sometimes go to Mayberry's for ice cream. Then we'll ride around the neighborhood looking at all the brightly colored Christmas lights and trees in the windows. We normally end up at a particular house with a huge outdoor tree with spectacular colored lights. We quietly stand under the tree. Looking up with folded hands the girls say a prayer. What started out as a wish became a prayer. Oh, the wonder of it all! There is always that sense of excitement and joy in their faces. God's light shines brightly through them.

Matthew 18: 3-4 says "I tell you the truth unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven".

We try to remember Christmas is more than a day, a season or holiday. Christmas is a Holy Day. God's promise, Emmanuel, God with us, revealed in us. Christmas is the gentle arrival of love, hope, mercy, grace and peace, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Christmas is proof that the song Jesus Loves Me is true. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Christmas is God's invitation for all to come worship and adore Him.

Romans 15:13 - "*May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with the power of the Holy Spirit*". Amen.

Merry Christmas,

*Jackie Gillespie*





## DECEMBER 17

Luke 21:5-19

*Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."*

*"Teacher," they asked, "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"*

*He replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away."*

*Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.*

*"But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life. (Luke 21:5-19)*

What a powerful scripture for today's time. In this passage, Luke is trying to tell the people that they have placed so much emphasis and fixation on the wrong things in life. He is warning us of the false prophets that will appear not in just body form, but in anything. In the passage it is the reaction to the destruction of the temple in which people were not prepared for such a devastation.

Jesus warns us to be strong in our faith and firmly planted in our journey with him. He tells how false prophets will challenge us to attempt to stray us from the one true living God. We have so much of that in our world today, we have so many small voices of wrong against God and his teachings that they seem to boom over the air waves to try and pull more into their way of action and thinking. We need to be that bright light in the world, sharing God's Love with all. We have HOPE in our God and his LOVE for us that he will prevail. He will guide us through all times of calamity that we never need to doubt.

As we look to recent events of disaster like hurricanes, fires, war, tornados, and tsunami, many of which we can predict, but never know just exactly when and how much damage they will create. We need to rest assured that God will be with us through these moments of fear and despair. He will show us a way to reach out to others in need. God will never forsake us or leave us. He is ALWAYS with us. Christ is our Firm Foundation.

These situations, disasters, and challenges only make us stronger. They help develop our character to help us persevere. It provides us HOPE for a future grounded in God's discipline and Love.

Patti Wood





## DECEMBER 18

Isaiah 9:6 & Psalm 34:18

### *Christ is Our Hope*

*“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**”* Isaiah 9: 6

*“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.”* Psalm 34:18

Christ is Our Hope. These words are written in stone for our family. It's on my grandparents, my parents, and now my oldest son's headstone, footstone & now a brick which overlooks Lake Junaluska.

Grief has never been more real and ever present than is the case this last year. God has never been more present and real as is the case this past year too. God has provided the “manna” (& prayers) we needed just to get through the day.

As Clarissa Moll writes in her book, *Beyond the Darkness*, “Grief is not a strength building exercise or an object lesson. We meet Jesus not only in triumph but in suffering. Our vulnerability in grief reveals Christ's strength abounding in us. It is not in our strength but in our weakness where we discover him mighty to save.” It's not about us. It's about Christ...our Christ who saves...our Christ who was wounded and bruised for our transgressions.

Sometimes, in my weakest moments, I realize God lost His Son...gave His son...His sinless son...for us...for our transgressions....and by His wounds we are healed & saved.

When it comes to grief, “we can mistakenly believe that how we navigate grief will show us what we're worth.” (C. Moll, *Beyond the Darkness*). It is a myth that “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.” It's also a myth that “time heals all wounds.” As C.S. Lewis writes when he lost his beloved wife, “losing a loved one is like having your leg amputated. You don't get over an amputated leg. The wound may heal, but the leg will never grow back. You'll always walk with a limp.”

This year, we've experienced the greatest loss of our lives. We never wanted to walk this journey with the loss in this present life of our son Jason.

In an attempt to let “nothing be wasted” as Glenn said, and to carry on Jason's legacy with he & Jillian's four kids and our son Robert's family, we've gotten very involved with Jason's passion to help St. Jude children and their families win their battle over childhood cancer and sickle cell anemia. (That's another story for another time). I don't know anything about being a parent to a child who has cancer or sickle cell anemia as St Jude parents know and experience, but I do know and have first hand experience of being a parent who survives my son Jason two days before Thanksgiving 2022. I'm an expert practitioner of weeping, lamenting, and the anguish upon learning our son Jason didn't survive the helicopter crash. I know first hand “the bite of sobs that flow, when you have regained your breath, upon learning that your child has gone...even to be with God.” (as Harold Bales wrote in *Southern Fried Preacher*).

I know first hand...CHRIST IS MY HOPE! I pray Christ is Your Hope too!

Prayer: *Dear Lord, thank you for being near to those of us with broken hearts. We ask you to save those crushed in spirit for our Hope is in you. Amen.* (Psalm 34:18)

*Susan Myers*





# DECEMBER 19

1 Peter 2:12-21

## *Preparing in Three Ways*

Historically, the church has celebrated Advent as a season of preparation in three ways: preparing for Christ's birth, preparing for Christ's presence, and preparing for Christ's return.

In the United States of America, as we all know, Christmas is a commercialized holiday. When Pastor Herve was visiting with us recently from Kigali, Rwanda, he told me that Christmas in Rwanda is celebrated religiously and not commercially. Churches hold prayers and caroling, some lasting the whole night before Christmas. Most of the Western traditions associated with Christmas are not practiced in Rwanda. It is a time where Rwandans worship and when they spend time together with their families. As I think about buying gifts for others at Christmas, sometimes I have a certain amount of money that I think I need to spend on each person. But is this really expected and necessary? Could the money be better spent to help those in need? Perhaps we can examine how we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child – are our activities leading us closer to Him? What can we do to show our children and grandchildren the true meaning of Christmas?

We can prepare for Christ's presence in our lives now by taking the time to sit at His feet. Remember in the story of Martha and Mary that Jesus said, "Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:42). The Holy Spirit is in us now and He is waiting patiently for us to listen. Listening and resting in His presence takes preparation – we must set aside the time and the place to do this.

Between Christ's ascension and His coming again, we are in a time of preparing for His return. We have Christ's promise and it is a light. We read in 1 Peter 2:19, "**And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.**" We are not to be in despair about our present times because we have a Savior and we have hope. In response, as Hebrews 12:1 states, "...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Happy worshipping, sitting, and running!

*Neredith Gantt*



# DECEMBER 20

Matthew 21:23-32

## *The Parable of Obedience*

In the midst of the Advent season, as we prepare for the arrival of Christ, we find ourselves in a time of reflection and self-examination. The passage in Matthew 21:23-32 offers a valuable lesson that resonates with the spirit of Advent – the importance of obedience.

In this passage, we encounter the religious leaders of Jesus' time questioning his authority. They demand to know by what authority he performs his miraculous deeds and teaches. In response, Jesus tells a parable about two sons. The first son initially refuses to obey his father's command to work in the vineyard but later changes his mind and goes. The second son agrees to go but fails to follow through. Jesus asks which of the two did the will of the father, and the answer is clear: the first son who obeyed, albeit belatedly.

This parable reminds us of the essence of obedience. It's not merely about making promises or appearing righteous; it's about genuine, heartfelt action. During Advent, we reflect on the promises made by God through the prophets and the promise of His Son's coming. But it's not enough to acknowledge these promises. We must respond with a true change of heart and obedience.

In our lives, we often find ourselves in moments when we need to choose between saying we will follow God's will and actually following through with it. It's the difference between paying lip service to our faith and truly living it. Advent calls us to be like the first son, who may have initially hesitated but ultimately embraced obedience.

As we prepare our hearts for Christ's arrival during this Advent season, let us remember that true obedience requires action. Let us not be content with empty words and unfulfilled intentions. Instead, let our actions reflect the love, grace, and truth of Christ, as we eagerly anticipate His coming. Just as the first son's delayed obedience pleased his father, our heartfelt and genuine obedience pleases our Heavenly Father, and it is in this obedience that we find the true spirit of Advent.

Matthew Heald





# DECEMBER 21

Amos 4:6-13

## *Suffering with Purpose*

In Amos 4: 6-13, God has sent major challenges to His people in Israel. Drought, famine, plague – all to call them to come back to Him. His people, however, do not listen. As you read the passage, pay attention to the repetition of the phrase: “yet you have not returned to me.”

At the time of this writing, (760-750 B.C), the people of Israel were politically secure and spiritually smug. They had forgotten God’s punishments for being unfaithful, and God had lost His patience. So, God sent his prophet Amos to explain – to declare – that He was going to judge the unfaithful, the disobedient, the covenant-breaking people.

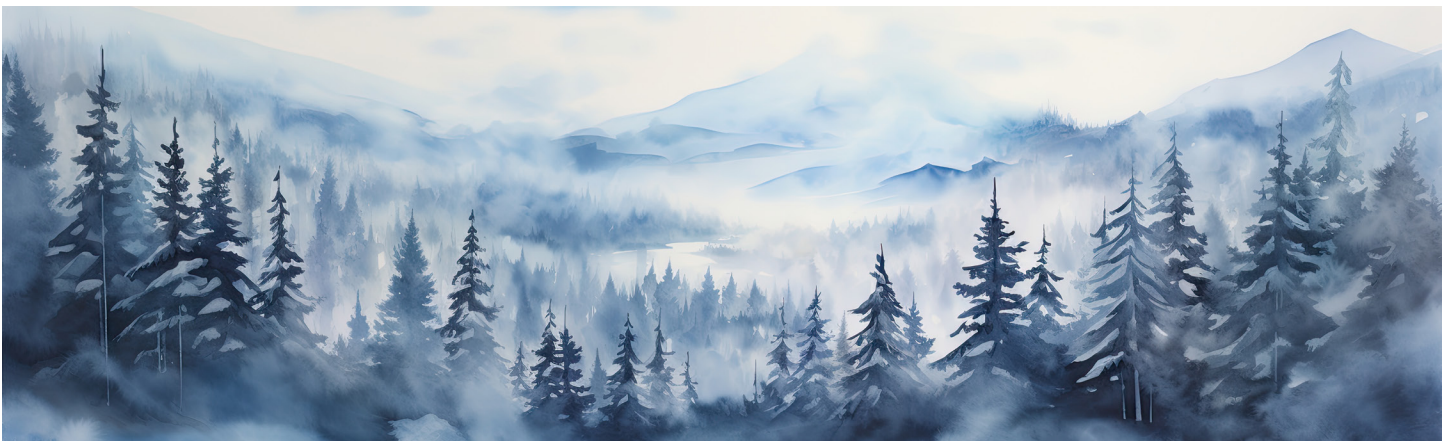
Aha! God caused the drought, the famine, the plague to get the attention of a very stubborn people who were preoccupied with the good life. These people – God’s people – felt as if they didn’t even need God because life was so good that they had forgotten who gave them the good life in the first place. His people had begun to believe that they were the source of their own prosperity. God knew that only drastic measures would get their attention.

So here are the questions that inevitably arise in our lives and have throughout time. Does God cause suffering to get our attention and bring us back to him? And then we wonder... Why does a loving God allow suffering at all?

I don’t know, but for the most part, I don’t think so. I don’t believe God smites a specific child with cancer or condemns a certain adult to live out his final years in the chaos of Alzheimer’s. What I do believe is that He has challenged us to find peace and purpose in our seasons of pain. As a Stephen Minister, I believe that our experiences of pain help us grow in our own spiritual journey to where we are able to guide others who are suffering closer to God as well.

Regardless of what causes your suffering, God and God’s people are waiting with open arms to comfort you. All the time in all situations. That dear sweet babe born in a manger became the ultimate symbol of suffering and sacrifice for us all. Share that message with all who are broken today.

*Cathy Weaver*



## DECEMBER 22

Psalm 89:1-4

*I will sing of the Lords great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through the generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David, my servant. I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all the generations."* Psalm 89: 1-4

For the Lessard family, the Advent season has always been a time of spiritual preparation for the birth of "The Christ" who had been promised for generations through the prophets. Advent, which translates as "the coming," is a season of hope and faith, peace, love, and joy. During these weeks we are reminded that God's word, and specifically "His covenant," is eternal and has moved through the centuries to rest in each of our hearts.

In our world today where nothing appears permanent; we see nations, rulers, countries, alliances, principles, values and sometimes even our faith appear to be in constant flux, God's divinity, and faithfulness never waivers. How often in the history of mankind do we hear about a promise that transcends generations? Yet, we see God's commitment to establish David's line "forever" and make his throne "firm" and consummated in the birth and life of Jesus. God's covenant became flesh in the "Son of Man" who walked, loved, taught, healed, blessed, suffered, and died to fulfill a sacred oath made so many thousands of years ago. I can think of no more poignant, or relevant example of God's love and faithfulness to each of us than this covenant He has kept through the shifting sands of time.

So, as we wait in prayerful anticipation through these next four weeks, may we remember that this fulfillment of God's promise is as true and powerful today as it was thousands of years ago. This is profoundly underscored by the knowledge that we serve a faithful God who preserved the most precious bloodline through times of conflict, wars, great victories and catastrophic defeats, exile, enslavements, suffering and miraculous interventions. Through the prism of holy history, we can clearly see that God's reign, like His covenant, is timeless. So, as we walk through this Advent season may we remind one another, our children, and grandchildren that no matter the earthly challenges we face, the God of the ages, the "Ancient of Days" is there for us with an everlasting love we will only truly comprehend on the day we join Him in glory.

Always,

*Jayne and Paul Lessard*





## DECEMBER 21

Matthew 22:15-22

*Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man, for you do not regard the position of men. Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites. Show me the money for the tax. And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them. "Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God. When they heard it, they marveled, and they left him and went away". (Matthew 22:15-22)*

In reviewing the suggested Bible verses for this publication, Roy and I agreed there could be no more appropriate verse than this at Christmas time.

We ponder the question of exactly how and when did this season become so divided in its meaning and, therefore, its importance. When did people shift from the celebration of the works and wonder of God through the gift of His son, to the commercialization of all things "Caesar" - toys, gifts, clothing, money. When did our focus move from the celebration of the birth of Jesus with the promise of both eternal life and salvation to the annual anticipation of the first Hallmark Christmas special and the ever increasing "early sales" both on the internet and every retail store in America. It seems safe to say we will never see a "Barbie and Ken" Manger Set.

Just as the Pharisees attempted to "trick" Jesus, we have fallen victim in our failure to see that at this time of year, we should turn our thoughts and actions away from "things" and "render unto God" our devotion, our commitment to help all mankind and then open our hearts to the wonderment of His deeds.

*Prayer: Father, I come before you today with a heart full of gratitude. There aren't words to express the love and appreciation I experience knowing the grace and mercy you extend to me daily. I'm grateful to have accepted Christ as the light of my life. I know the true reason for the season because of someone who once presented salvation through Jesus Christ to me. My prayer is that I may also have the courage to present this wonderful gift of salvation to everyone who will listen. This season celebrates the birth of our savior and I pray my life reflects my passion for this celebration. In Jesus name. Amen.*

Vicki and Roy Shipman



## DECEMBER 24

Matthew 5:38-42

*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42 NIV)*

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)*

### ***The Gift***

Imagine a gift you've received that was so thoughtful and touched you in a such a way that left a smile on your heart. What was it? The actual gift? The meaning behind it? The way the person noticed something that you thought had gone unnoticed?

Recently I have learned that after delivering my father's eulogy you can find yourself thinking about a story or words you wish you had chosen. This season I am unable to find words for the hole that is felt with my father's recent passing. We all have those places in our life that no longer feel complete and where something is lacking. The places where we need to focus more on Jesus and less on what we lack. The story I wish I had told standing in the pulpit of the church I grew up in at my father's funeral was one of the biggest lessons he taught me: the gift of giving. He did this in many ways throughout his life by how he gave and provided to me. However, there was a specific instance where he spoke this into my life. I was 21 and among a group of college peers, there was someone I knew that needed financial help that semester. I had received the information secondhand after the person had asked a few friends for the money with the promise to pay them back. I wanted to help. I asked my parents for the money to help this individual. My father gave me the money, his only reluctance was over my expectations of giving it to the person. He asked what I expected from doing this and firmly stated that if I gave this to the person it must be a gift. He explained that if I expected something it was no longer a gift, it was a contract. As a retired president of a bank, my father had seen the struggles that many had in repaying their debts. Despite me saying the person would pay me back, he was insistent that if someone was in a place where they were unable to afford something and I provided it for them, there was no guarantee that they would ever be in a place to return what had been given and most likely they never would be. It sounded harsh at the time, I knew this person... of course they would pay me back, they were working hard in school and in a part-time job, why wouldn't they? When he gave me the money he told me "you won't ever see this money again and you may not ever see that person again, I need you to be okay with this". He tried to warn me that once a person feels indebted to you the scope of the relationship changes. He attempted to highlight that being in debt leads people to shame or guilt and that is not something we want to produce in another human being. The lesson is simple and something we all know: give from your heart and give without expecting anything in return, but do we truly remember it with all our actions? My daddy was right, as grateful as the person was when I gave them this gift it didn't take long before they distanced themselves when they saw me and within a few months this person was just someone I used to know.

It makes me wonder now as I write this how many individuals know the gift that God has given us, yet feel unworthy to accept it or to truly follow him, ridden with shame and guilt over the past or reluctance that they are capable of measuring up. Therefore they fail to accept Jesus into their hearts.

There's a quote I like to use, "expectations are premeditated resentments". Isn't that the truth though? We expect so much from ourselves and from others when the only thing we need to "expect" is to meet our father in Heaven and we do so by living a life waiting expectantly on Jesus.

The humanness in us can make us feel guilt over something we could have handled differently or shame over not saying something that we wish we had said. As imperfect and fallible as our human condition is, in the moments





when I feel unworthy of the gifts I have been given, it's a good reminder to realize that it isn't about me. Accepting Jesus isn't reading scripture in the morning, saying a prayer in the evening or even attending church on Sunday. It's a way of life. It's a continuous journey and consciously knowing that every decision will bring you closer to God or take you further away. How we live our lives is for His Glory, not ours. He is worthy, we are sinners and fail miserably at measuring up to His capacity of love, but yet we are fully equipped by His Spirit to live a life worthy of redemption.

In the modern world, Christmas and "the weeks before" have become a time when we think of gifts as we hurry around trying to check off the list and wrap all the presents in time. I could easily say that my most precious gift is my parents. Earthly gift that is. I would not be the person I am if it wasn't for them. But the best gift, one more precious than them is the one that trumps all else: the gift of Jesus Christ. Tomorrow we celebrate the birth of our Savior. Nothing else truly matters aside from this.

I see hope as expectant waiting, but the more I ponder on this I see waiting as mostly a physical concept of how we spend our time until what we hope for or expect happens. Expecting is mostly our intellect; it is what we are confident in happening, good or bad. Hope is both intellectual and physical, yet it's deeply rooted as emotional. It is always directed toward a better future regardless of the likelihood. It's God's hope that we can rely on to sustain us in all circumstances. God gave us the most precious gift of salvation through His Son. And He gave us this gift without any expectation, only the opportunity for us to accept or reject this gift. The God of all creation, the one who made the stars in the sky, came down in human form in the most humble of ways being born in a manger. Through scripture we know that God is a good, good father and we can't help but acknowledge His faithfulness, His truth, His beauty, His grace, His worth, and His glory. But He doesn't use any of those things to sway us or to force us to love and obey him. He never attempts to control us by holding His power or what He has done for us over our head. The beauty of the freewill He has given us is the reassurance that we get to choose Him, for He is love. True love. He gifted us and then He gave us a choice.

I hope this Christmas our highest expectation is in the love of God. A love that is so big and gave us the most precious gift because of who He is regardless of who we are. As we exchange gifts and sentiments this season and going forward, I urge you to give because of who you are, not because of how you want to be seen or what you expect to gain from it.

I know I am not facing struggles and temptations more difficult than what others have faced. Through loss, my faith reminds me that God has not changed and He will never leave me. He has promised to strength me to be a victorious conqueror until I reach heaven with Him. That's my hope. That's what I can expectantly wait on as I walk this earth and live my life indebted to Him.

Our hope in God is a promise, a promise that is perfect and will be delivered if we accept that sweet baby Jesus as our true Savior. Sweet sleep friends, for tomorrow our Savior is born!

*Prayer: Prince of Peace, bestow on me the gift of hope. While waiting can be difficult, guide my ways so that I may rest confidently in hope with the expectation of a glorious future beyond what I can ask or imagine. Not only do you sympathize with your creation, you went to the extent of becoming part of creation in order to save me – knowing that it would cost you your life. The fact that you loved me enough to gift me salvation is inconceivable and for this I give you my life. Thy will be done, Lord. In Jesus' precious and Holy name, Amen.*

Melody Emerson

Director of Communication and Connections, Wesley Memorial Methodist Church





# Merry Christmas

DECEMBER 25

John 1:1-18

## ***Creating Christmas Memories***

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (Jn. 1:14). Memories are powerful. Memories can give life or destroy, depending upon the content of those memories. We need to be intentional about creating life-giving memories for our children.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, and eventual martyr for his Christian faith, spent Christmas 1943 in a Nazi concentration camp, but he wrote to his parents that he would not let his loneliness get him down. Rather, he thanked his parents for the wonderful memories they gave him of past Christmases and assured them that those memories made the pain of the concentration camp bearable. Bonhoeffer’s family had given him memories of a distinctly Christian Christmas.

We need to be intentional about creating distinctive Christian Christmas memories for our children. Their memories should be filled with “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” and “Joy to the World” instead of “Frosty the Snowman” and “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.” Family memories could include worship, Scripture readings, Christmas prayers, and acts of mercy to those in need. Our children should have great memories of how Christ was a part of our celebration, instead of mom and dad attending an endless array of parties that took them away from home. As a congregation, we offer one another many opportunities during this season to create great Christian Christmas memories. We are blessed.

Here is a simple prayer that you can use as a family:

*May we be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the magi, and the peace of the Christ child. Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us now and forever. Amen.*

*Dr. Jeff Patterson*

Senior Pastor, Wesley Memorial Methodist Church





# THANK YOU

This devotional is provided to you by our Adult Spiritual Formation Team. Thank you to all the members of our Wesley Memorial Methodist Church family who contributed to making this year's Advent and Christmas Devotional. More copies of this devotional are available at the Front Desk - please feel free to take a copy to a neighbor, a friend, or someone in need of a way to connect with God and with the community of faith during this Advent season.

